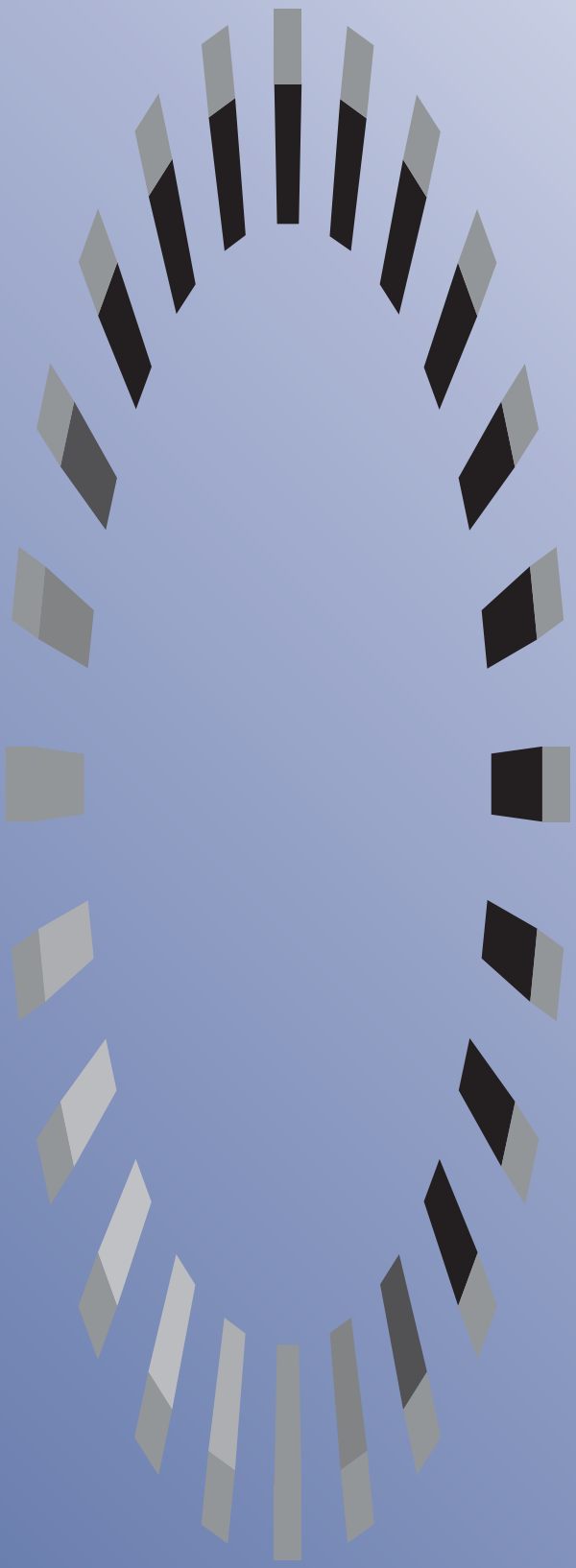

Adult Learners and State Policy

by Richard A. Voorhees & Paul E. Lingenfelter

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CAEL

Adult Learners and State Policy

A JOINT PUBLICATION OF SHEEO AND CAEL

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks for their contributions to this study go to:

- The Ford Foundation for its support of this publication
- Richard A. Voorhees and Paul E. Lingenfelter who served as primary authors
- CAEL staff Pamela Tate, Karen Steinberg, Tom Flint, Ruth Frey, Nicole Quackenbush and Charles Clutter

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Adult Learners and State Policy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No state can prosper with a poorly educated workforce, nor can it continue to prosper if its workforce fails to learn continuously.

Most of the workers of the next two decades are already over twenty-five years old.

These simple truths require states to assess the knowledge and skills of their adult population and to develop and implement policies that enable current workers, as well as the next generation, to compete more effectively in the global economy.

The following study reviews the participation of adults in postsecondary education and outlines policies and strategies states can use to enhance the capacity of their workforce. In brief, the study indicates that:

- Adults know that they need to learn. Nearly half of the adult population is now participating in formal education, and the trend is rising;
- More than 40 million adults, over 20% of the total adult population, are involved in work-related learning;
- Despite the growth in adult learning, millions of adults who need instruction are not participating. The most obvious gap is in the participation of adults who need to enhance their basic literacy skills. About 40 million adults function at the lowest levels of literacy; only 3 million of these are receiving instruction. Many other adults need further learning to re-tool for changing jobs, acquire higher-level skills, or obtain a credential to aid career advancement and flexibility.
- To increase the competitiveness of their workforce states should:
    - Identify state needs based on the capacities of the workforce, the needs of existing employers, and the needs of employers the state would like to attract;
    - Analyze the programs and institutional resources that can serve adult learners, and determine whether state policies and practices promote greater participation and success;
    - Set explicit statewide goals and develop statewide strategies for reaching those goals, as well as for monitoring the state's progress; and
    - Determine which goals require direct state action and state subsidy - take action and allocate resources to achieve these goals.

Table 1, presnted here and discussed on pages 9-11, describes state policies and practices that discourage and impede adult participation in learning and those that encourage and promote it. States that seek to give adults greater economic opportunity and to increase the capacity of their workforce can use this continuum for a self-assessment of existing state policies. Such an assessment is a necessary first step toward enhancing and sustaining a competitive workforce.

Table 1
Continuum of State Policies that Influence Adult Participation

Policy Area	Discourages	Neutral	Encourages
Overall Stragegy for Adult Participation	▶ State polices do not specifically target adult participation ▶ State policies are designed to serve 18-22 year olds but not others	▶ Market forces determine which institutions serve adult students	▶ State creates and/or refines structural and academic policies to encourage adult participation in education
Data Systems and Evaluation	▶ State does not report adult participation rates ▶ Institutions are penalized when part-time student behavior does not meet performance benchmarks established for full-time student behavior, e.g., graduation and retention rates ▶ State does not report on economic returns for participation in postsecondary education	▶ State reports adult participation rates but does not utilize this information ▶ State recognizes that many adult learners meet their needs by attending several institutions and that some may not need to pursue a formal degree	▶ State collects and uses data on adult participation for strategic planning ▶ State maintains systems to track the migration of students between institutions and sectors ▶ State develops a system for defining the educational needs of its adult population (basic education, degree attainment, specific competencies) and a strategy for meeting them ▶ State routinely reports the economic returns for participation in postsecondary education ▶ State reports systematic follow-up of job placement rates and employer satisfaction with learning outcomes by program ▶ State agencies link data systems to connect education and employment data
Interagency Cooperation	▶ No established relationship exists between higher education and state economic development, human services, or adult literacy entities	▶ Representatives from higher education and state economic development, human services, or adult literacy entities meet routinely but do not coordinate programs or initiatives	▶ Collaborative programs by higher education and state agencies address identified workforce needs ▶ Collaborative efforts extend opportunities for education and training to welfare recipients ▶ Collaborative programs by higher education and state agencies address identified literacy needs among adults ▶ State agencies work collaboratively with Community-Based Organizations, One-Stops, and employers to communicate common information on support and training and education opportunities

Table 1
(continued)

Policy Area	Discourages	Neutral	Encourages
Fiscal and Financing Policies	▶ Taxpayers support only classes provided on-campus or state desinated sites (no alternative sites permitted) ▶ Financing systems lack flexibility to develop distance learning or other innovative instructional approaches. No taxpayer support provided for distance education classes ▶ State financial aid is available only for full-time students ▶ State policies require tuition payment prior to class/ program enrollment	▶ State polices permit institutions to develop tuition payment schedules based on employer reimbursment	▶ Taxpayer support is available for instruction at employer sites ▶ Appropriate financing is provided for innovative learning strategies ▶ State financial aid is available for less than full-time students ▶ Aid is targeted to students in fields where there are worker shortages ▶ State policies permit direct support for priority groups of adult learners, from a specific company or employment field
Academic Policies	▶ Remedial or 'refresher' classes are not available and/or are not supported by taxpayers ▶ No dialogue exists with businesses to meet literacy needs of undereducated adults ▶ Credit awarded for distance education classes is not accorded the same academic standing as "regular" classes ▶ Program approval process routinely spans six or more months ▶ Four-year institutions are not required to have articulation agreements in place	▶ 4-year institutions are required to develop and maintain articulation agreements with community colleges throughout the state	▶ Remedial classes are widely available to learners and appropriately supported ▶ Remedial providers are encouraged to work with businesses to meet literacy needs of undereducated adults ▶ States policy encourages the use of distance education, particularly when institutions request speedy responses to specific training or worker education needs ▶ Articulation agreements are widely disseminated ▶ State actively monitors and enforces articulation agree ments ▶ Program approval process is streamlined

Adult Learners and State Policy

INTRODUCTION

Adults are learning in record numbers and recent trends suggest even greater participation in the future.[1] By the end of this decade, it is projected that more than half of American adults will take advantage of formal learning opportunities—courses and programs—made available by an expanding number of schools, colleges, training organizations, and other providers.

Despite this fact, not all adults who could benefit are engaged in formal learning activities. Currently 56% of the workforce needs some education beyond high school to do their jobs, and it is virtually certain that this percentage will increase in the future. Studies suggest that 80% of new jobs created over the next two decades will require some postsecondary education. Without further education, many adults now in the workforce are unlikely to be able to obtain and hold employment until they reach retirement age.

Education is not only increasingly essential for basic employment, it is also essential for economic prosperity and career advancement. Recent census data have underscored the connection between high skills and high wages. Workers with a bachelor's degree enjoy an annual income nearly $20,000 higher than workers who only have completed high school.[2] The economy will continue to leave workers with minimal or obsolete skills behind. Continuous learning and training is critical for all employees and their employers in the new global marketplace.

Adult learning is not only an important issue for adults and employers, it is also a critical concern for state policy makers. The connections between a state's economic vitality and a skilled workforce are inescapable. No state can prosper with a poorly educated workforce, nor can it continue to prosper if its workforce fails to learn continuously. A governor concerned about economic development recently observed at a national forum that the rich states are not those with low taxes, but those with a lot of well-educated people.

A state that hopes to sustain or increase its economic prosperity must pay serious attention to the policies and resources that enable its adults to acquire knowledge and skills. It will also find that attending to the educational needs of adults has important side benefits. Increased educational attainment is associated with more involvement in community life and more opportunities for future generations. The more highly educated the parents, the greater the likelihood that their children will succeed in the K-12 school system, complete high school, go on to college and achieve higher levels of literacy as an adult. [3]

What must states do to achieve and sustain a well-educated workforce?

- *A decisive first step is to identify the gaps between current adult education levels and the state's vision for its economic future.* This requires a clear understanding of the state's adult population, the characteristics of the emerging adult population (those under the age of 25), in-migration rates, and the types of jobs a state wants to create or sustain.

- *Second, states must assure that available programs can provide the skills required for new or changing jobs.* This requires an assessment of the needs of employers and an assessment of the education providers within the state. The latter assessment should include informed judgments about the education providers' relative capabilities and effectiveness in meeting the state's needs.

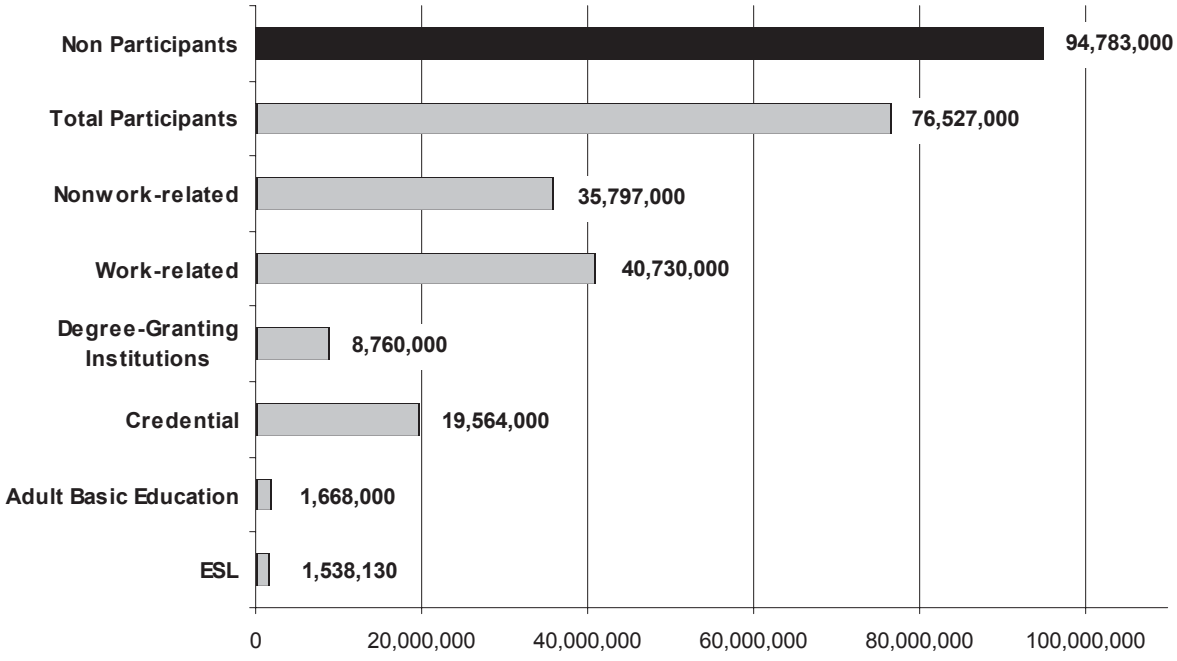
- *Third, states must establish and foster continuous communication and good working relationships among state policy makers, employers, and educational providers.*

- *And, finally, states need to monitor the participation and completion rates of adults and the quality of programs serving them.*

THE ADULT LEARNER

According to a recent study, almost 90 million adults were enrolled in one or more formal learning activities in 1999 (Figure 1). Formal learning in this study is defined as a course or program led by an instructor. Figure 1 depicts adult participation in English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education, programs that lead to a credential, enrollment in degree granting institutions, work-related programs, and non-work-related programs. These activities overlap, but in total they provide an impressive glimpse of adult interest in organized learning. While total participation is remarkable, **more than half of all adults, nearly 95 million, reported no contact with formal learning in 1999.** Even when we account for those in this group that may be retired and no longer participating in the workforce, we can still infer that further learning could help millions of adults become more productive citizens.

Figure 1 Adult Participation in Formal Learning



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Participation Trends and Patterns in Adult Eduation: 1991 to 1999
Adults are citizens 25 and older

Half of adult enrollments in 1999 were related to work. Since nearly half the adult population is enrolled in a course of some kind, more than one in five of all adults received some form of work-related instruction. The remaining adults involved in formal courses pursued education for personal, recreational, or other non-economic reasons. In addition, more than 3 million adults enrolled in formal courses because their previous education or lack of English fluency did not provide the base needed to profit from more advanced levels of education.

Data from the Census Bureau and other sources suggest that **overall adult participation rates in each activity area are well below what they might be if all adults were enrolled in courses matching their needs.** For example, the National Adult Literacy Survey indicates that almost 40 million adults function at the lowest of literacy levels.[4] This rate of illiteracy, and the annual increase of nearly 800,000 legal immigrants from countries where English is not the predominant language, suggest that the number of adults who will need and who would benefit from basic education or English instruction far surpasses the 3 million adults who now participate.

There is also considerable potential for increased adult enrollment in work-related instruction. The total number of workers in the United States is now over 140 million.[5] However, less than one-third of this total (40.7 million) is enrolled in work-related courses, despite an abundance of information documenting necessary skill upgrades needed by the incumbent workforce in our knowledge-based economy.

It is not easy to draw a clear portrait of the many levels and venues of adult learning activity.. Many providers of adult education in its various forms operate "below the radar." In "Appendix A" – "Adults, Degrees, and Credentials," we provide a quick summary of where and how adult learners are finding access to postsecondary education. There we note that many Americans have not benefited fully from higher education, and that troubling disparities among racial/ethnic groups persist on the continuum of educational attainment.

The challenge of addressing unmet educational needs and reducing these disparities is exacerbated by the fact that **the most educated adults are most likely to obtain more education.** Those with bachelor's degrees are nearly three times as likely to engage in adult education as those with less than a high school education. Participation in credential programs is highest among groups that have already attained a college degree. Participation in work-related and non-work-related courses is also highest for groups with peak levels of education and occupational status. This suggests that those who need education and training the most are participating the least.

THE STATE ROLE IN BUILDING AN EDUCATED WORKFORCE

Achieving and maintaining a well-educated workforce is challenging, but it is attainable with continuous attention throughout the life span. Every stage of life presents opportunities for learning that, if pursued, build a strong foundation for future achievements. In like manner, missed opportunities create deficits which tend to persist and accumulate over time.

The American workforce of the early 21st century bears the burden of accumulated learning deficits from several sources. First, a large number of working adults received their elementary and secondary education during an era when the knowledge and skills required for a good job were much less rigorous. Many adults who were adequately prepared for work in the 1970s must now go back to school to find or keep a good job. Second, and perhaps most problematic, a large number of adults have not been adequately educated, even by the standards of the 1970s. Undereducated adults and their children most frequently live in poverty. Not only do their states and communities bear the costs of social services necessitated by that poverty, they also lose the contributions these adults could make to society if they were better educated.[6] Finally, changing technology and global competition are continuously making obsolete the specific skills of even the most educated adults.

Developing and maintaining a competitive workforce requires states to be concerned with the entire educational system, from pre-school through post-secondary education. States must meet the educational needs of the adults currently living and working therein while simultaneously improving the preparation of the next generation—a big challenge even in good economic times. Many states are facing a large influx of recent high school graduates to their postsecondary institutions at the same time that they are wrestling with severe budget cutbacks. While every aspect of the educational system demands attention, the focus here is on meeting the educational needs of adults – which includes those who seek career entry, growth and mobility, those who need additional education to remedy accumulated deficits, and those whose skills are becoming obsolete. **Although most state policy makers are aware of the challenges to providing post-secondary access to traditional student populations, they may be less conscious of the needs of adult students and the challenges they face in accessing post-secondary opportunity.**

Perhaps more than any other educational task, meeting the needs of the adult learner requires collaborative work. While the private sector is an important player, public policy and targeted public subsidies play a critical and fundamental role. **States need to recognize that the capacity of their workforce cannot and will not improve to the level demanded by the economy without their active involvement and intervention.** Employers, community organizations, and educational institutions of all kinds have a responsibility to utilize the resources at their disposal to meet adult learning needs. In order to do this, state policy makers must understand how each part of the whole system works, along with the functional relationships among the elements of the system. Then they need to define and implement the state responsibilities for policies and initiatives that will make the system work most effectively:

- First among these state responsibilities is the task of identifying needs, setting statewide goals, and developing strategies for monitoring progress and reaching those goals. No other entity has the capacity or the incentive to perform this function.

- Second, states must determine <u>which</u> needs require substantial state action and subsidy. Typically the state needs to subsidize adult basic education, English language instruction, and general post-secondary education through student assistance programs and direct subsidies to degree-granting institutions.[7]

- Third, the state needs to identify areas where state involvement or partial subsidy is needed to motivate and direct other entities (employers, institutions, etc.) to meet their responsibilities.

- Fourth, the state needs to assess its educational, student assistance, tax, and regulatory policies to ascertain that each facilitates an environment favorable to adult learning.

All states can improve their performance of these responsibilities. Perhaps the greatest room for improvement lies in the development of an explicit needs assessment and state strategy for adult learners. Such efforts are essential for identifying gaps and areas of low performance that require state initiatives. They also lead naturally to a comprehensive view of the state and institutional policies that encourage or discourage the participation of adult learners, which are the focus of this report.

* *

Oklahoma's *Brain Gain 2010* provides a striking case study of the prominence adult learning plays in furthering state economic development. The initiative was launched in 1999, when the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE) began to promote greater educational attainment as the means to the state's economic development. Beginning with a study conducted by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) in 1997, OSRHE found that the post-secondary participation rates of the 25-44 age group was less than 2 percent in nearly a third of Oklahoma's counties. With assistance from CAEL, Oklahoma State Regents thereafter began a wide-ranging initiative that included relaxing the jurisdictional service areas of institutions, promoting on-line learning opportunities (including the collaborative Online College of Oklahoma), surveying business and industry to identify the learning needs of employed adults, and analyzing and revising OSRHE operating guidelines to improve the postsecondary access and success of adults.

* *

Kentucky is another state in which strong gubernatorial support is focusing public attention and resources on the positive role of education, especially at the postsecondary level. A statewide campaign, "Education Pays!," underscores the return on investment in learning. By reorganizing the state's two-year and vocational colleges into one system – the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) – the state strengthened its position to respond to workforce needs in tomorrow's economy. Kentucky is seeking to move beyond a stagnant economy based on tobacco, coal mining, and horse-racing towards a future in which medical/pharmaceutical research and other high-tech industries might flourish. With statewide efforts to improve adult student outreach, develop strategic partnerships with employers and key industries, and facilitate transfer and completion rates in higher education, Kentucky has become a frontrunner in its effort to innovate at all levels.

* *

A CONTINUUM OF STATE POLICIES

What state and institutional policies best serve adult and employed learners? In the Executive Summary, Table 1, "Continuum of State Policies That Influence Adult Participation," outlines public policies across five crucial areas that influence adult participation rates. States seeking to improve their approach to adult learning and workforce development can begin by locating the position of their current policies on this continuum.

Data systems and evaluation: States that actively track enrollments, program activity, movement of students between institutions, and completion data for all providers will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their efforts to serve adult learners. An ideal data system would provide evidence of where adult students enroll, the types of classes or programs for which they enroll, and their post-educational experiences.

Some states maintain centralized student unit record data systems for their public postsecondary institutions. These systems can be used to track the migration of students between institutions and sectors of postsecondary education. An optimal system might also trace whether given courses transfer, thereby enabling an evaluation of the effectiveness of articulation agreements between institutions or common course numbering schemes. Follow-up studies of program completers are a critical ingredient in the evaluation cycle. This information can be used to determine program viability by collecting information on wages, length of employment, job responsibilities, and, ideally, employer evaluation of graduate competencies. These data can be collected by contacting employers and completers; the collection process may also benefit from cooperative agreements between postsecondary education and state labor departments to match wage data with academic records. Florida and Missouri have made important strides toward developing the data systems required for such studies.

Interagency cooperation. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) requires the participation of higher education, state departments of labor, adult literacy agencies, and human services agencies in state workforce investment councils. Collaboration among these public agencies and the private sector is essential. Routine attendance at meetings, however, seldom yields results unless the participants set meaningful goals and hold themselves accountable for achieving them.

For example, a goal of increasing the number of welfare recipients with the skills essential for long-term employment is likely to require more than simply opening wider the doors to postsecondary institutions. It may also necessitate financing strategies that fully utilize federal and state resources, the cooperation of postsecondary education in reshaping programs to provide specific training, and the efforts of social service agencies to permit and help finance training longer than 12-months in duration. Interagency cooperation might also bear more fruit when institutions of higher education work directly with Community Based Organizations (CBOs) who have extensive experience helping adults with educational deficits.

Fiscal and financing policies. Some adults need financial assistance in order to participate in educational activities. Nearly all adult learners need opportunities that are offered at convenient times and places. States that encourage adult participation will

provide financial support for classes and programs offered off-campus, including those classes provided at employer sites. In the same way, support for distance education can assist adults who cannot adjust their lives to fit the schedule and location of traditional classes.

Financial aid policies designed to accommodate the specific needs of adult students are likely to improve participation rates. Federal and state financial aid programs need to take into account the normal course-taking patterns of adult students. Financial assistance can be crucial for very poor students whose family or employment responsibilities do not permit taking more than one or two courses at a time. It is also in the interests of these students to complete educational programs expeditiously. Where appropriate, providing enough financial aid to enable adults to take larger course loads may be advantageous to successful completion of programs.

Tuition assistance for low-income adults may come also from federal welfare reform and workforce development initiatives, but these programs often only support short-term training that leads to minimum-wage employment. States can creatively expand their use of TANF dollars by directing their flexible maintenance of effort funds to finance training that is longer than the12 months designated by the federal standard. This would require collaboration between state agencies involved in higher education and those involved with implementing federal regulations. Similarly, postsecondary institutions, especially community colleges, may better assist adults served by the Workforce Investment Act's (WIA) One-Stop centers by creating employment-related programs that are shorter than traditional post-secondary offerings, but more comprehensive than those very brief programs typically supported through WIA.

Tuition collection policies also can limit participation. State or institutional policies that require tuition to be paid prior to class enrollment may raise barriers for working students whose employers will reimburse them for tuition only after a course is completed. Employers, too, might consider whether their reimbursement policies hinder employee participation. Flexible policies for collecting tuition—matched to student or employer ability to pay in installments—should be part of every employer-employee financing strategy. Institutional policies might also encourage employee enrollments from high-priority industries by permitting discounted tuition for groups of adult learners from a specific company or in a particular employment field.

Academic policies. Academic policies that focus on total statewide learning needs will visibly and explicitly accommodate adult learners. For example, adult learners are especially mobile among sectors and institutions. When institutional policies penalize or discourage mobility, participation and achievement will be impeded.

A key statewide academic policy issue is the extent to which previous learning can be counted toward an adult's academic standing. Most adults lack the time or tolerance for repeating coursework unnecessarily or for negotiating bureaucratic obstacles. In addition, they tend to resent and resist requirements to take courses that teach what they already know.

To better serve adult learners, postsecondary institutions must find ways to recognize and credit the knowledge and skills that adults have acquired through work and life experience, when these capacities are, in fact, the learning objectives of established courses.[8]

Student success is increased at an institution that has developed and widely disseminated articulation agreements and policies designed to help students make timely progress toward a degree.

Adult students often require access that transcends time and place barriers. Polices that promote the availability of distance education delivery assist adult learners, especially place-bound adults. Yet distance courses that are organized along traditional lines –those that are solely the responsibility of individual faculty members, minimally interactive, and constrained by the traditional semester or quarter calendar—do not transcend these barriers. The highest quality distance education offerings can be more learner-centered than such traditional instructional approaches. State academic policies that lead toward higher quality, student-centered distance offerings provided on flexible schedules could materially increase adult participation.

Competency-based learning models can also be used to "unbundle" traditional classes into smaller "learning objects" that can more conveniently reach adult learners. These smaller units of instruction, in turn, might fill learning gaps in adult life and work experiences to meet targeted learning goals.

Remedial education at the postsecondary level, while controversial, is commonly practiced. Many traditional and adult students seek postsecondary education when they are only partially qualified to succeed in college work. Any state that seriously believes it needs to upgrade the capacities of its workforce must encourage and enable such students to participate in higher education. Ideally, when remedial instruction is required, it should be provided in the institutional setting where the student is likely to receive most of his or her instruction. In states that restrict remedial instruction to community colleges, the state's policies should encourage upper division institutions to contract with community colleges to deliver remedial education for students who aspire to a baccalaureate degree.

The adult remedial market often consists of individuals who have been out of school for some time or who come from limited English backgrounds. The latter group may require intensive English instruction before they can benefit from classes in other subjects. Many working adults could benefit from remedial or basic adult education, and their employers would benefit as well. Public policies encouraging partnerships with business and industry to meet the literacy needs of undereducated adults would enhance workforce capacities.

Finally, effective state strategies for adult learning require a constant process of evaluating the changing needs of employers and workers and developing educational programs to meet them. The length of time it takes to approve and implement new programs can spell success or failure for partnerships between institutions and employers. When such processes are streamlined at the state and institutional levels, the resulting speedy, flexible, high-quality institutional responses to employer needs can lead to strong, long-term relationships with the business community.

CONCLUSION

Despite dramatic increases in the number of adults obtaining formal learning from various providers, the participation rate of adults in degree-granting institutions, either public or private, has remained basically unchanged for more than a decade. Yet we know that increasing the number of degree-holders in a given state will have a measurable effect on improving the state's overall economy. It seems clear, then, that if states want to achieve sustained economic growth and prosperity, they must create policies and a policy framework that will improve the knowledge and skills of their adult workforce. While non-traditional providers of adult learning will continue to meet important needs, states must make an effort to more effectively utilize the resources of their degree-granting colleges and universities—both those that provide general education as well as those that offer training focused on specific workforce needs of adults. The need for policies to remove harmful obstacles and to facilitate wider and deeper adult participation in formal learning activities has never been greater.

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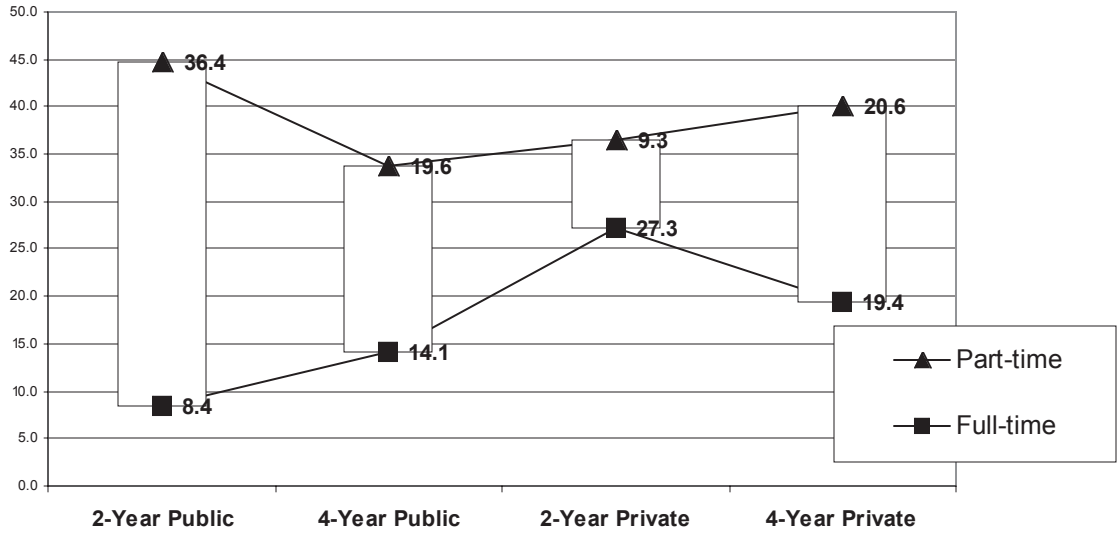
APPENDIX A - Adults, Degrees and Credentials

Adults find learning opportunities in many places—degree-granting higher education institutions, corporate training entities, and adult education programs operated by school districts and community based organizations, and local parks and recreation districts. States have no formal relationship with many of these providers. Consequently, finding useful data on levels of adult participation within these entities is daunting, except for the approximately 3,900 degree-granting institutions within states that participate in federal financial aid programs. Because these institutions are required to report enrollment and degree completion data through the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), it is easier to assess their contributions to statewide goals for adult participation. Less data are readily available for the more than 5,000 postsecondary institutions operating in the United States that do not award financial aid or an associate's degree or higher.

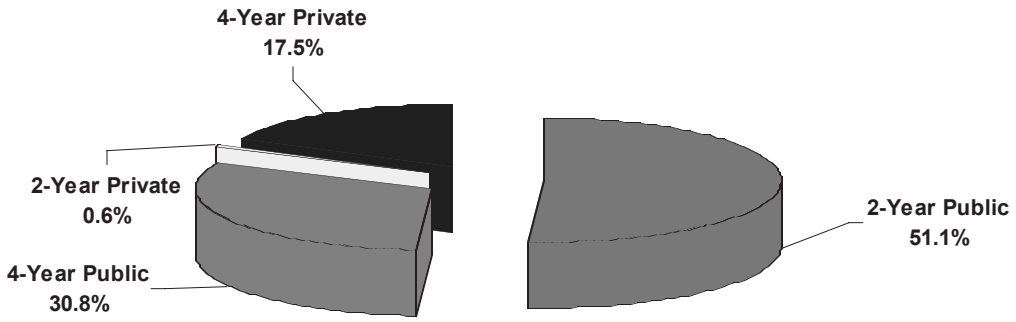
Figure 2 summarizes full-time adult enrollments in public and private degree-granting institutions by institutional type, and Figure 3 displays the same information for part-time enrollments. Figure 4 displays the adult proportion of total enrollment within each sector and type of institution.

Figure 2
Adults as Part of Total Enrollment



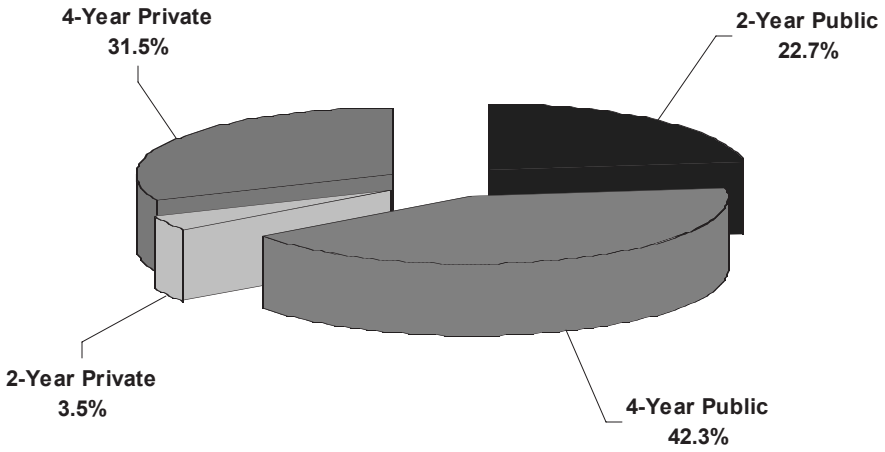
Source: National Center for Eduation Statistics, Fall 1999 IPEDS Enrollment
Adults are citizens aged 25 and older

Figure 3
Part-Time Adult Enrollment by Sector



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Fall 1999 IPEDS Enrollment
Adults are citizens aged 25 and older

Figure 4
Full-Time Adult Enrollment by Sector



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Fall 1999 IPEDS Enrollment
Adults are citizens aged 25 and older

As shown on these figures:

- public two-year colleges lead other sectors in part-time adult enrollment, as a proportion of total enrollment
- public community colleges also enroll the smallest proportion of full-time adult students compared to total enrollments
- private two-year colleges lead in the proportion of full-time adult enrollment, but their proportion of overall adult enrollment in the United States is very small
- many undergraduate adult learners enroll in public and private 4-year institutions, and a substantial portion of them enroll full time.
- while the contribution of 4-year institutions to overall adult enrollments includes graduate or professional schools, nearly three fourths of total adult enrollment is at the undergraduate level.[9]

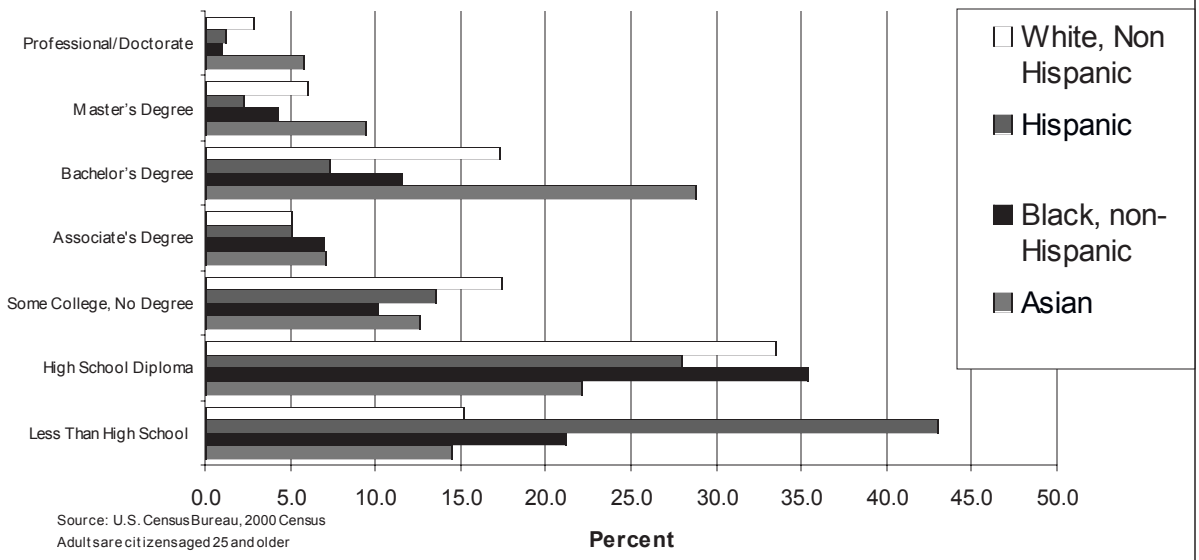
What is striking about this information is the relatively small number of adults enrolled in *all* degree granting institutions: only about 8.8 million adults in 1999 out of the nearly 19.6 million enrolled in postsecondary programs leading to degrees, certificates or vocational training credentials. And, despite the sharp increase in overall adult learning, the participation of adult learners within private and public degree-granting institutions remained essentially flat during the 1990's.

Clearly, the majority of adult learners were attending proprietary vocational education institutions that do not award an associate's degree or beyond, continuing education programs that do not lead to degrees, or courses and programs offered by organizations not eligible to participate in federal financial aid programs. For example, nearly 1.6 million information technology certifications were awarded outside of degree-granting institutions in 1999.[10] The rise of corporate universities, the popularity of e-learning opportunities, aggressive recruitment by alternative providers, and the willingness of employers to accept alternative credentials have generated more and new kinds of opportunities to learn.

While the growth of alternative pathways for credentials often meets the needs of adult learners, especially those who seek sharply defined, marketable skills, it also presents new challenges for state policy makers. Non-degree granting providers rarely offer general education to help learners acquire broad knowledge and more sophisticated analytical and communications skills, the capabilities that often are essential for leadership roles and career advancement. Learners also often face a daunting task when they try to get the skills and abilities learned in these alternative programs recognized as they move into traditional programs of postsecondary education.

While the proportion of the population with a baccalaureate degree or higher reached an all time high in 2000, many groups of Americans have not benefited fully from higher education. Figure 5 documents the educational attainment of the adult population according to the 2000 census. **Most striking are the large number of Hispanics who lack a high school diploma (approximately 42%), and the gap between Blacks and Hispanics and White or Asian adults in attaining baccalaureate or higher degrees.** It is also remarkable that 15 percent of the adult white population lacks a high school credential and almost 35 percent have only a high school diploma at a time when 56% of the workforce needs some education beyond high school in order to do their current jobs.

Figure 5
Highest Education Attainment by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2000 Census
Adults are citizens aged 25 and older

FOOTNOTES

[1] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics,* 2001, NCES 2002-130. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau. *The Big Payoff: Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings.* P23-210 Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 2002.

[3] Sticht, T. and Armstrong, W. *Adult Literacy in the United States: A Compendium of Quantitative Data and Interpretive Comments.* Washington, D.C.: National Institute for Literacy, 1994.

[4] Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad. *Adult Literacy in America: A first look at the findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey,* National Center for Education Statistics, 1993.

[5] U.S. Department of Labor. *Occupational Outlook Quarterly,* "Labor Force," Author, 45(4), 2001.

[6] A number of national and state organizations have identified level three proficiency on the Adult Literacy Survey as the minimum standard for success in the labor market. Yet, only half of the nation's adult population reaches this level, placing the U.S. behind eight nations in adult literacy-Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, and Belgium. Sum, Andrew, Irwin Kirsch, and Robert Taggart, *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality: Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective,* Educational Testing Service, Princeton, NJ, 2002.

[7] While the public and individual benefits of basic adult education and general post-secondary education are clear, employers have no incentive to subsidize these services for non-employees and only limited incentives to subsidize them for their own employees. Employers do value and invest in training, however. It is estimated that 70 percent of all businesses provide employee training, totaling more than $100 billion in spending. Lerman, R., McKernan, S., and Riegg, S. *Employer-Provided Training and Public Policy.* Paper presented at America's Workforce Network Research Conference. Washington, D.C.: Author, June 2001.

[8] The Council For Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) recently published two books that can help policy makers and institutions identify the obstacles to awarding credit for prior learning and to benchmark institutional performance: Zucker, B., Johnson, C., and Flint, T. *Prior Learning Assessment: A Guidebook to American Institutional Practices.* Dubuque, IA; Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1999, and Flint, Thomas A. & Associates. *Best Practices in Adult Learning: A CAEL/APQC Benchmarking Study.* New York: Forbes Custom Publishing, 1999.

[9] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics,* 2001. Table 175.

[10] Adelman, C. *A Parallel Post-Secondary Universe: The Certification System in Information Technology.* U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 2000.